

THE MADNESS OF SIGHT

EMANUEL ALLOA

What happens when we 'see'? What goes on, within vision itself, every time we perceive something? This seems an odd question at first, as we are usually not interested in vision itself unless we lack it, either because of a momentary interruption (such as a dark railway tunnel) or because of a more fundamental hindrance (such as an illness affecting vision). But what happens when we *actually* see, i.e., every time we are *enacting* vision? There are plausible reasons for asserting that this is the central question traversing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's whole philosophy. It is in the unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible* though that the question of the status of vision itself unfurls its potency through his many and often elliptic working notes. Despite their disparate character, one motif nevertheless returns several times in these notes: vision must be thought of in terms of a "delirium," an "ecstatic" state. "There is a sort of madness in vision," Merleau-Ponty asserts (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 75). In this paper, I shall analyse the figures and the grounds of this motif.

It can be shown that by claiming that vision is splintered by madness, Merleau-Ponty does not at all aim at transferring vision into the realm of mental representations, of inner hallucinations or of any other kind of de-realized phantasmagoria. On the contrary, it is the ecstatic *structure* of madness that Merleau-Ponty believes to be organising all bodily perception. Instead of implying that vision is only concerned with inner representations, the working notes would rather suggest that, while seeing, I am elsewhere than I am, over there, near the visible object.

Curiously enough, Merleau-Ponty associated this "mad" structure of displacement inherent to vision not so much with Cézanne, whom he wrote about extensively—and even less with the Spanish Baroque, as Catherine Buci-Glucksmann does in her *La folie du voir* (whose title refers explicitly to the merleau-pontyan phrase)—but with a painter who is hardly under suspicion of giving himself to deluding visual fantasies: Jan Vermeer. While Merleau-Ponty's interpretations of modern art, and first of all, of Cézanne, have been extensively commented upon, his remarks on Dutch painting have not yet received the attention they deserve. By

reassessing what Merleau-Ponty calls the "Vermeer structure" on the backdrop of his own philosophy of vision, a different picture of the Dutch painter emerges, which stands in strict contrast to the one prominently upheld by Norman Bryson in *The Logic of the Gaze*. Far from being a reduction of visual space to a notational space, Vermeer's paintings outline what Merleau-Ponty also termed a "figured philosophy of vision" elsewhere. As I shall try to argue by concentrating especially on *The Music Lesson*, Vermeer's apparently well-ordered interiors demonstrate and even elucidate Merleau-Ponty's assertion: every vision is a madness insofar as every vision is possession. Through vision, the beholder may have the object at hand, beyond distance. But such a possession at a distance is only possible at the cost of a reciprocal possession: in order to actually see, the beholder must belong to the order of the visible, he must be potentially visible too, and, as such, he exposes himself to the lingering possibility of being held by what he beholds. This structural moment which can be described in terms of a "chiasm" of the viewer and the visible (*voyant-visible*) also implies an anthropological thesis: as a being whose existence fundamentally rests on vision, man is permanently "displaced," being where he is not and not being where he is. As a divergent line to the thesis that the predominance of vision firmly and definitely establishes a metaphysics of presence, Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy of vision points towards an anthropology of eccentricity.

Opsis and reflection: The anthropological difference

In Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, and nestled in the middle of what are often startling and obscure considerations about the origin of language, we nevertheless find an argument that directly speaks to us: What distinguishes man from all other animals, claims Socrates, is that he not only has a sense of sight, but that he is capable of a discerning vision. Like many other words, he suggests to his interlocutor Hermogenes, the Greek word "man" (*anthrōpos*) is a condensation of a longer expression, in this case *anathrōn ha opōpe*. "I mean to say," affirms Socrates, "that the word 'man' implies that other animals never examine, or consider, or look up at what they see, but that man not only sees but considers and looks up [*anathrei*] at that which he sees [*ho opōpēn*], and hence he alone of all animals is rightly *anthrōpos*, meaning *anathrōn ha opōpe*" (*Cratylus*, 399c-d).

If we read this passage as an expression of the privilege of man in the realm of vision, it could conversely also be interpreted as a symptom of the exorbitant privilege given to vision in that long afterlife of Greek

thought which we call Western philosophy. In this seemingly innocent passage, a discrepancy is overtly instituted between a mere perceptual sight (*opsis*) on the one hand, which man shares with other sentient beings but which still belongs to the realm of a sort of Leibnizean *perceptio confusa*, and an alert and discerning vision (*ana-athrein*) on the other hand which—by virtue of its self-reflexivity—becomes the distinctive mark, the specific difference, of man. Yet this sundering into two separate regimes of vision, which has been discussed in terms of the “schize” of the gaze from the eye, should not too hastily be identified with an arbitrary decision to purify vision from all its perceptual imperfections. We should rather acknowledge that this passage in Plato’s *Cratylus* is a premature actuation of a scene that was to be repeated often afterwards on other philosophical stages, in which vision is addressed in terms of its own visibility.

Envisioning perception—perceiving vision

What then does it mean to see? Can we become aware of vision itself? Under what circumstances may vision itself become visible? If we consider this question accurately, the aporia it contains becomes evident: Making vision visible implies turning it into something visible, conferring on it the status of one element among others in the visible world. If we assume that any perception is a perception of something perceptible, then vision itself, in order to be visible, must be transformed into something perceptible too. There thus seems to be a profound aporia in the effort to perceive the perception of a sense with this same sense, as Aristotle already observed (*De anima*, 417a3-4). How to reach the act of vision itself thus without reducing it to a simple perceptible thing, to a visible object among others? A historically well-known solution consisted in dissociating it from the world of senses and shifting it towards the pure act. I may doubt *what* I see, I may doubt the fact *that* I am perceiving something visible, but I cannot doubt the fact that, every time I doubt what I see, I am thinking of myself as seeing. The difficulties described by Plato and Aristotle as they try to derive a comprehension of the active vision from within the realm of the sensible itself seems to be resolved in Descartes’ decision to tear apart the order of the sensible, characterized as the realm of the *res extensa*, and the order of intuition, described as the *res cogitans*. Whereas in the realm of the *res extensa*, vision cannot have itself as its own object, the *intuitus mentis* refers to nothing else than to itself: *cogito cogitari*, I think myself thinking, *intueor intueri*, I see clearly and distinctly where nothing but intuition is my object.

If this dissociation into two orders solves the aporia of a clear vision of vision itself, the relationship between this intellectual grasp and the world of extended things now calls for a new explanation, as an ontological continuity can no longer be assumed to exist between the cogitative subject and the external world of bodily things. When a Cartesian looks into a mirror—as Merleau-Ponty pointedly writes in *The Eye and the Mind*—he does not recognize himself, he sees a dummy (1964: 170). After having engaged this radical dichotomy, Descartes will spend most of his philosophical effort explaining the nature of the relationship between the two orders. Instead of the perceptual recognition comes the intellectual analogy that owes nothing to the empirical qualities of what is seen. Far from having a relation of similarity, a true representation—says Descartes in his *Dioptrics*—must precisely be “non-resembling” as its relation to the represented can only be instituted by the intellect (1673: 113). It is thus not surprising that Descartes does not choose painting as a model for representation, but *taille-douce*, or line-engraving, which only maintains the forms of things and is capable of recreating the essence of forests, cities, people, battles, and tempests through a few strokes of ink on a piece of paper (*ibid.*). For Descartes, representation fundamentally rests on a semiotic relationship where every visible sign is an occasion for a mental operation. The less the sign resembles what it stands for, the easier this operation. Visibility is inevitably reduced to readability.

Framing the visible: Reading Dutch art

Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s radical overhaul of the philosophical tradition in his late ontology of the visible can in some ways be understood as an answer to these old aporias which result from the effort to give a philosophically accurate account of vision. Is it possible to consider vision as something neither coinciding with its object nor as something resolutely external to it? Is philosophy condemned to either situate vision among other visible phenomena out there—and thereby bypass our factual experience—or to ascribe it to a subjectivity that is *partes extra partes*, a sort of *kosmotheoros* without any standpoint—and thereby overlook the fact that all vision is limited by what is not actually seen? Merleau-Ponty’s solution will consist in assuming that vision on the one hand is not visible because it is actually that which enables the visible to become visible, while vision on the other hand is only possible for the one who sees because he is himself part of the visible world. For Merleau-Ponty, this belonging associated with non-coincidence is best expressed by the arts that draw on visibility itself, specifically painting, which was to become

the main interlocutor of his late work. According to *The Eye and the Mind*, paintings themselves exhibit a “figured philosophy of vision—its iconography perhaps” (1964: 168). If we are to go beyond the aporias of a two-world-ontology, vision must be situated prior to human subjectivity. The germination of the visible is already occurring in every moment within the world itself, and the natural reflections in the mirror are its emblem.

For Merleau-Ponty, no art expressed this coming-into-appearance anterior to the human subject better than Dutch painting. It is not by accident, writes Merleau-Ponty with reference to Paul Claudel’s *Introduction à la peinture hollandaise* (1935), that in many Dutch paintings the interiors seem deserted, since their living presence has been absorbed by the “round eye of the mirror” (ibid.). “More completely than lights, shadows, and reflections, the mirroring-image [*l’image spéculaire*] sketches in the things [*ébauche dans les choses*] the labor of vision.” (ibid., slightly modified translation) Painters, Merleau-Ponty adds, “often dreamed of mirrors,” because underneath this “mechanical trick” they “recognized the metamorphosis of the seeing and the seen.” (168f) In these paintings of interiors with mirrors by Pieter de Hooch, Emmanuel de Witte, Samuel van Hoogstraten, and of course Vermeer, Merleau-Ponty seems to find analogies to his own ontological refoundation of phenomenology, which is aimed at overcoming the subject-object-divide he sees as still being present in his *Phenomenology of Perception*.¹ In these paintings, human presence is either totally absent or so discrete that the human figures become almost part of the architecture itself, as in this extraordinary *Woman with a Virginal* by Emmanuel de Witte (fig. 1), which neither Claudel nor Merleau-Ponty mention, though. The real theme or “subject” of this painting is not the representation of the two almost effaced feminine figures. They will become visible to the eye of the spectator only once he has acknowledged the secret line organizing the visual space: the V-like light arrow entering from the window on the right, touching the floor on the middle and leaping off into the depth of the painting. But before even acknowledging this luminous lead connecting the two women, the eye is troubled by these geometrical light rhombs in the centre of the painting which only after some time may be identified as a phenomenal quality of the flagstones in the first room and as the traces of light in the middle room. Even after we have distinguished and dissociated the two types of light rhombs intellectually, the eye still perceives them as the continuous, phenomenal vertebrae of the painting. This and many other paintings could have confirmed Merleau-Ponty in his idea that the nascence of visibility is located in an anonymous *milieu*

which is prior to the constitution of the object and the subject of vision. By positing a “work of vision” within the things themselves, a sort of self-reflexivity of the visible, he seems to have formulated a description of vision that can do without a subject.

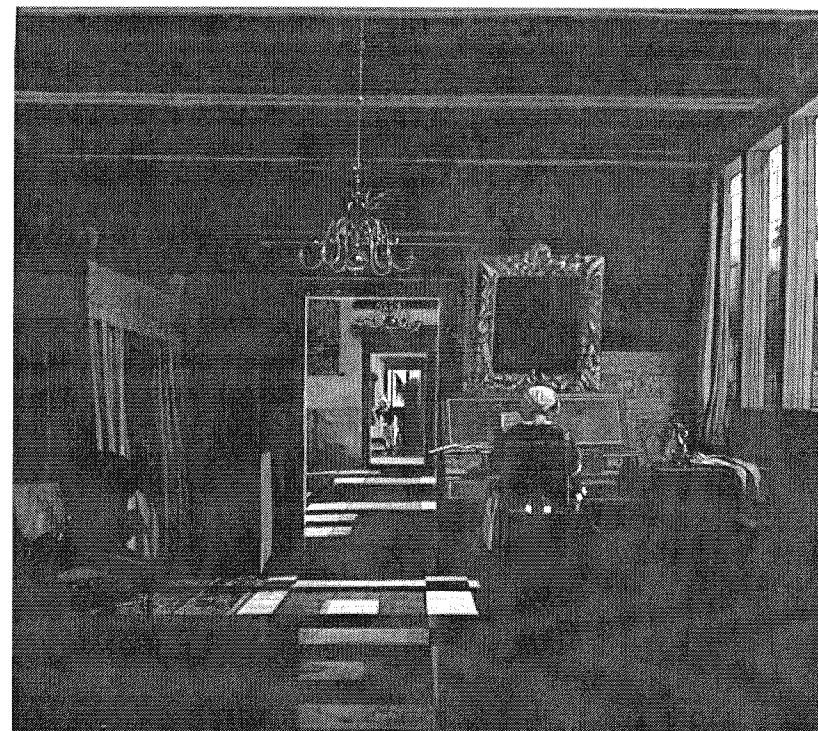


Fig. 1: Emmanuel de Witte: *Interior with a Woman at the Virginal*, ca. 1665, Oil on canvas, 97.8 x 110.2 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Montréal.

But before coming to these philosophical consequences, let us turn back to Paul Claudel’s text first. His reading of Dutch painting, which was later to be included in his *L’Oeil écoute* (*The Eye Listens*), not only inspired Merleau-Ponty’s late thinking, but was also influential for art historians specializing in the period and specifically in Vermeer. What drew their attention was not so much Claudel’s insistence on the intimate cohesion of “beings and objects,” which have “such a comprehension of each other that they don’t want to be separated” (1935: 54) (a statement that certainly spoke to the author of *The Visible and the Invisible*), but Claudel’s claim

that the object's photographic truth was inaccessible to human perception. "What fascinates me" explains Claudel, "is this pure, cleansed, sterilized gaze stripped of all matter, of a somewhat mathematical or angelic, or simply photographic candor, but what photography: a photography in which the painter, secluded in the interior of his lens, captures the external world." (32) The Dutch painter, he asserts, "is a mirror that paints, everything he does is the result of a *reflection*, of a learned exposition of the plate to the lens." (54) These passages in Claudel have often been seen as support for the assumption that Vermeer employed optical devices in order to record the represented scenes: in Svetlana Alpers' influential *Art of Description* for instance, the author quotes Claudel's remarks as an early intuition that Vermeer's vision is not an embodied one but relies on the geometrics of a *camera obscura* which he supposedly used (see Alpers 1983: 30). Other passages in Claudel speak of the self-referential nature of Dutch art, the immanence of its eventless interiors, and its self-containment, which all seem to dismiss any external spectator. 17th-century Dutch paintings compose "a sort of talisman, an intimate formula, a secret charm, and one understands that the characters which inhabit them can't break free from this domestic paradise. What a difference to some modern paintings which, if they weren't bound by their frame, would explode and flee in all directions like lemonade." (Claudel 1935: 27)

The thesis of the autonomy and self-containment of Dutch art, which has often been repeated since Hegel's *Aesthetics*, has been radicalised in Norman Bryson's claim that it can also be understood to imply the negation of an empirical spectator. As opposed to the Albertian window which opened onto a spatial continuum, the frame of a Vermeer painting indicates the irreversible split between the viewer and the seen. "[T]he viewing subject," states Bryson, "is now proposed and assumed as a notional point, a non-empirical Gaze," excluded from the world of the extended *visibilia* (Bryson 1983: 112). Thus the subject "is to be received as notional, notational, as a mathematical fiction" (116), and therefore from now on, the main organizing principle of the image, rather than focus or perception, will be *notation* (115).

It would be spurious at this point to discuss these assertions on a purely art-historical level. As Merleau-Ponty puts it with unmistakable clarity: "Every theory of painting is a metaphysics" (1964: 171), and Norman Bryson's theory rests on a metaphysics too, which may easily be identified, although it does not outright say its name: it is profoundly Cartesian. What else may a non-empirical gaze reduced to a point without extension be than an *intuitus mentis*?

But this conception is also Cartesian in a second, more indirect way: The argument of Alpers' book that Northern art, as opposed to Renaissance art, describes rather than depicts, while Dutch painting arises from a "mapping impulse" (about which much has been subsequently written; see Huerta 2003: 90-101), finds an unexpected ally in Descartes' theory of representation. If there is no ontological kinship between the *res extensa* and the transcendental *cogito*, an interpretative reading of the first by the latter becomes inevitable. Bryson therefore sees a correlation between the pure mathematical *notion* of the seeing subject and the conventional *notation* of the many maps that adorn Vermeer's pictures. Following Kepler's formula, expressed a few years earlier, nature is a book that needs to be deciphered.

Conventional viewpoints on Vermeer

The argument that Vermeer's visibility is subjected to a general principle of readability is tenuous: According to Bryson, the experience of being dazzled by Vermeer's paintings has to do with a loss of perspective. While at first glance, we do only see the almost photographic recreation of the real, the eye progressively discerns areas on the canvas whose texture and rendering openly conflict with the rest. "At no single distance from the painting," argues Bryson, "will the spectator discover its global intelligibility." (1983: 116)² The conclusion he draws from this observation is, however, somewhat peculiar: The painting must be conceived of as a non-empirical construction, "as a plurality of local transcriptions which nowhere melt in the fusion of a simultaneous disclosure" (ibid.). Although Bryson does not make his reasoning explicit, the argument leading to the claim that Vermeer's painting is notational can be reconstructed as follows: The only representational system whose meaning does not change depending on the viewpoint is a semiology of discrete, conventional signs.

Whether a map is written on leather or printed on paper; whether the land be blue and the sea be brown, as in the map displayed at the back of Vermeer's *Officer and the Laughing Girl* (fig. 2, detail); what matters is that the viewer should be able to recognize its represented elements from the diacritical context. Similarly, it does not matter whether Delft is painted as a circular dot, whether it is written in full letters, or is represented as an aggregation of schematized houses raising from the flat countryside. As a matter of fact, and if we push this reasoning to its limit, the mapping principle can dismiss vision as such: It literally does not need

any *View of Delft* at all; and other senses and faculties may well be more adequate for processing its information.

Bryson's assumption, however, that the impossibility of viewpoints within Vermeer's paintings calls for a cartographic reading, reveals a poor conception of viewing itself and of the pictorial strategies for rendering the complexity of vision. The dialectical scheme Bryson delineates between a timeless, almost non-human gaze and a furtive, instantaneous glance (1983: 87-131) not only misses the actual perceptual process—which, it could be argued, is not the subject of his essay anyway—but more significantly ignores the elaborate spatial as well as temporal architecture of vision projected by Dutch painters.

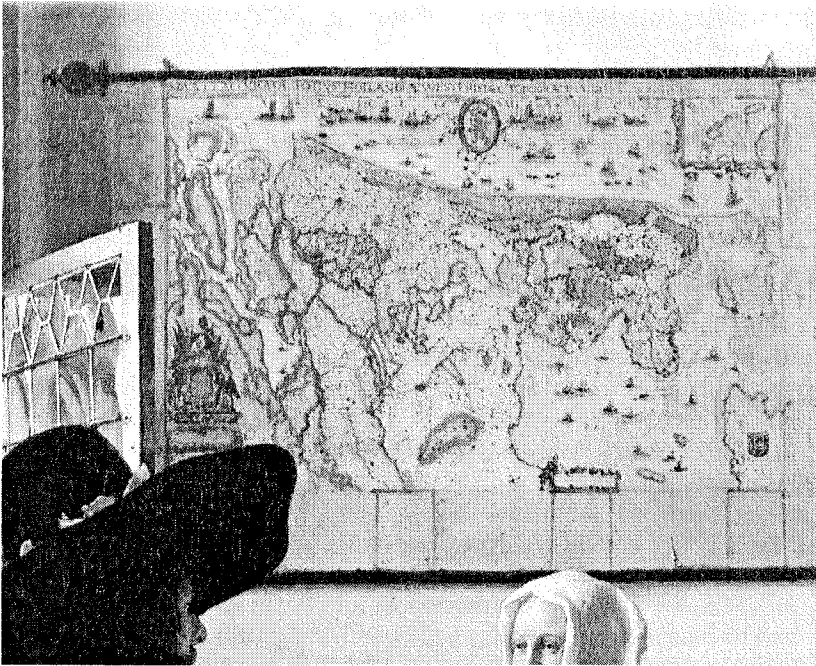


Fig. 2: Jan Vermeer: *The Officer and the Laughing Girl* (detail), ca. 1655-1660, Oil on canvas, 50.5 x 46 cm, The Frick Collection, New York.

If Bryson's reading is representative of the still-dominant interpretation of Dutch *schilderconst* in the 17th century, some alternative approaches have been explored recently. Karin Leonhard, for instance, argues in her monograph on Vermeer that the Dutch *interieur* should not be conceived

of as something immanently closed onto itself but as an open architecture which lures the spectator to transcend his or her own position and to enter it (Leonhard 2003). Similarly, I would like to show that in Vermeer's paintings we may find what we could call, in accordance with Merleau-Ponty, a "figured philosophy of vision." Although inevitably with much less art-historical accuracy, I shall now consider one of the paintings analysed by Leonhard, and then finally move briefly to another work, which enacts a mobilisation of the gaze which contradicts the idea of the absent spectator.

The Music Lesson: Openings



Fig. 3: Jan Vermeer: *The Music Lesson*, ca. 1664, Oil on canvas 74.6 x 64.1 cm, Royal Collection, St. James' Palace, London.

At first sight, the painting known as *The Music Lesson* (dated around 1664) (fig. 3) perfectly illustrates Bryson's account of the impenetrability of the depicted interior. The scene on display is situated at the far end of the room and an impressive heap of things piled up on the right-hand side dissuades the spectator from drawing nearer. We are kept at a distance in the position of mere outside observers, peeping silently without reciprocity, seers withdrawing themselves in order to bestow their own visibility on those they see. Such an evasion of the reverse gaze is highlighted by the spatial orientation of the box-like room: As in the *Allegory of Painting*, the viewer sees the body of the viewed "from behind" (Bryson 1983: 114); what is displayed in front of his eyes is literally at his disposal. In *The Music Lesson*, the viewer turns into a *voyeur* of an intimate scene between the lady playing the virginal and the man (who is he? her music teacher? her lover? both?) standing close to her. The view Vermeer displays for the spectator seizes a relation between two beings in a crucial moment and condenses this relation into a scenic concentration. Despite the distance, we are right there, we have an insight into the core of the relationship between the two figures, which we can now conceive as the object of our insight. Despite the distance—or we should probably rather say: because of it—we are able to grasp the sense of what is going on; from a distance and in the midst of a space populated with immobile objects, we comprehend the contraction of the separation between two human beings.

If we are to understand the fascination the model of vision exerts on Western thought, we must recognize its fundamental character as being a grasp from a distance, by virtue of which we can take hold of what is out of our bodily reach. Such a potential to expand the range of the subject's action beyond physical boundaries grounds the enduring coalescence between the faculty of vision and intellectual comprehension. Plato's passage about the anthropological difference in *Cratylus* thus rests on the difference between seeing and *having* what we see, implying that man is the only animal really making use of the potential of vision, which is the faculty of grasping the sense of the seen. As Hans Jonas diligently showed in *The Nobility of Sight*, the sense of vision differs from others such as the sense of hearing or smell insofar as what is seen is considered to be immediately present, facing the subject, and therefore at his disposal (Jonas 1954). There is an active reach for what is out there, which seems to be limitless, since what is displayed in front of the subject is at (his) hand, however far and physically distant it may be. Hence the fantasies of omnipotent vision that Merleau-Ponty describes in his late work. "There is a sort of madness in vision," he writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*

(1969: 75). One cannot but think of Heidegger's denunciation of the age of modern subjectivity as *The Age of the World Picture*, which reduces the knowable to a self-presentation in the form of an image (Heidegger 1938).³ When I look at a picture, says Merleau-Ponty, I can't pretend to be external to it: I am here, but also over there, in the picture. It appears *to me* and *for me*, I reach out for it. Painters have always worked with this ambiguity, Merleau-Ponty declares, as painting "awakens and carries to its highest pitch a delirium which is vision itself, for to see is *to have at a distance*" (1964: 166).

To have at a distance

This striking expression, however—to *have at a distance*—may have a twofold meaning. To have at a distance can be the very opposite of a delirium, it can describe a measured contemplation from a secure viewpoint, such as in Dürer's taxonomy of the naked female body from behind a wired grid. Viewing thus "at a reasonable distance" allows reason to take possession of the viewed without being possessed by it (fig. 4).

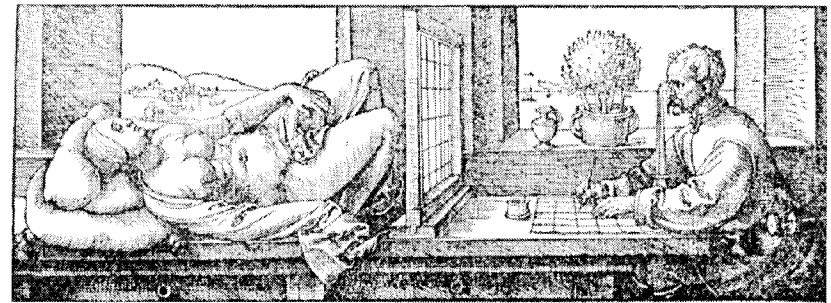


Fig. 4: Albrecht Dürer, *Man Drawing a Reclining Woman*, Woodcut from the second edition of Dürer's *Underweysung der Messung*, Nuremberg, 1538.

Interestingly, this philosophy of the voyeur joins with another idea raised in philosophical anthropology, such as in the work of Hans Blumenberg, namely the definition of man as the animal essentially acting *per distans*, reaching beyond his own finitude, while managing a space for himself at a sensible distance (Blumenberg 2006). This first interpretation however makes little sense in the context of Merleau-Ponty's later ontology of vision. His ontological refoundation precisely aims at overcoming the dualistic conception still dominant in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which inevitably reduces the visible to an object of the subject's vision,

putting the subject “back at the origins of a spectacle which I could never have had unless, unbeknown to myself, I organized it” (1969: 44). Merleau-Ponty’s intuition in the *Phenomenology of Perception* about the fact that my vision is only possible because I am myself embodied and thus *visible* to others is now radicalized in an ontology which I like to call an ontology of inherence, meaning that I can visually grasp something at a distance only because my being is already inherent in the visible. Whence an ontology of promiscuity rooted in the conviction of a shared element, a common fabric to me and the things in the world, for which Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of *flesh* (“chair”). Vision thus does not come from out of myself, it “happens among, or is caught in, things” as an anonymous nascence (1964: 163). We may now begin to understand what Merleau-Ponty means by calling vision a “madness.” Far from being a unidirectional possession, the fact that every seer must share the same world as the seen turns vision into a risky enterprise where the possibility of a return possession is always lingering.⁴

If we now consider Vermeer’s *Music Lesson* again, we may notice the slightly inclined mirror above the head of the young lady (fig. 5), giving us access to what remained invisible from behind, which is to say her face. Whilst commentators such as Bryson have rightly pointed out how the box-like orientation of the interior ends with the vertically raised, opaque lap of the virginal, the figure in the mirror seems to contradict this frontal perspective. While her body is entirely concentrated on the action she is performing on the instrument in front of her, her face’s reflection in the mirror is caught in a physically impossible and almost cubist twist to the right, as if her gaze were tending in a different direction than her body.

This challenge to linear perspective is not simply a whimsical capriccio by the artist: In the mirrored image, we become aware of the almost imperceptible, but all-pervading deformation Vermeer applies to what he depicts. The left wall will not simply lead the viewer’s gaze to the front end of the room; its window openings follow a subtle grading of progressive transparency, enabling Vermeer’s famous light source from the left to penetrate further to the right the deeper one enters the room. What seemed to be the means of a proper construction of perspective (the angle of the left wall, the longer shadows towards the back, etc.) appears more and more to be the symptom of an inevitable deviation to the right, which the viewer’s gaze will have to perform as well. As is well known, Merleau-Ponty extensively wrote on this “coherent deformation” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 104) at work in modern art from Cézanne to Picasso.

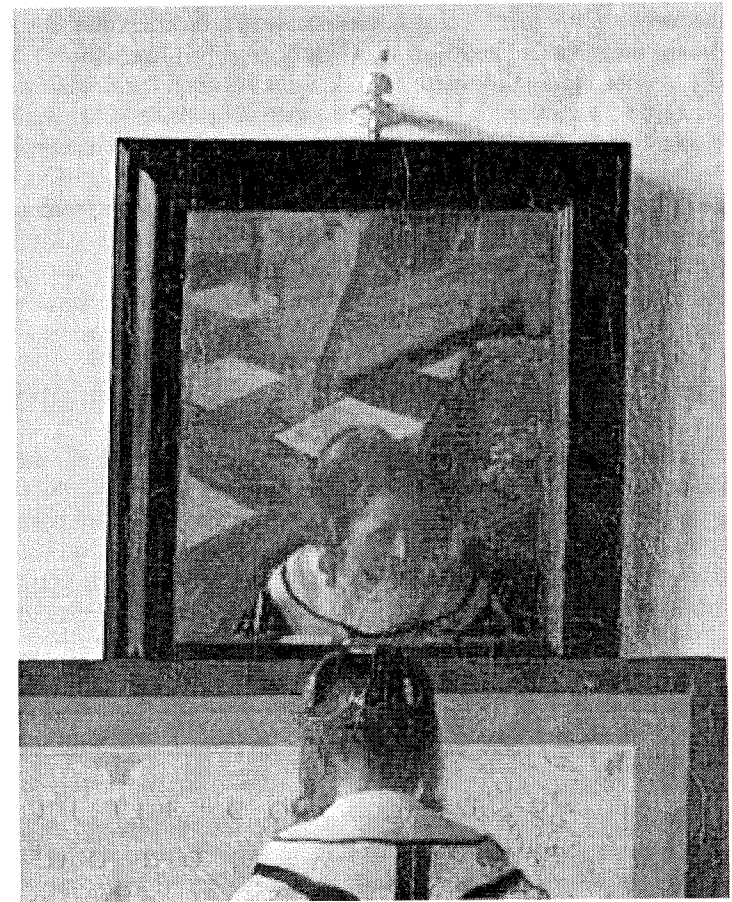


Fig. 5: Jan Vermeer: *The Music Lesson* (detail).

What has less been acknowledged is that he recognized Vermeer as their early predecessor: There is a “Vermeer structure,” he writes in *The Prose of the World*, which consists in a “system of equivalences according to which each one of its elements, like a hundred pointers on a hundred dials, marks the same deviation” (1973: 70). Instead of affirming the circular self-reflexivity of the viewer, the mirror in the Vermeer painting would thus indicate that vision is fundamentally an “opening” (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 151), a divergence, or a “dehiscence” (*déhiscence*) within the viewer: “Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to oneself; it

is the means given me to being absent from myself, to assist at the fission of Being from inside.” (1964: 186, slightly modified translation). When I see, I am not thoroughly here, but I am already in a “proximity through distance,” a “palpation or auscultation in depth” (1969: 128), implying a torsion of the visible onto itself and ultimately a return of a certain idea of reflexivity, though very different from the preceding one. “The mirror appears because I am seeing-visible [*voyant-visible*],” and the reason for it, Merleau-Ponty adds, is that there is “a reflexivity of the sensible,” itself translated and extended by the mirror (1964: 168). Yet the question remains: Does this apply to Vermeer’s painting? In what sense can we say that the spectator is visible in the mirror?

Reversed possession: the chiasmic structure of beholding

If we take another look at Vermeer’s mirror, we should not only pay attention to the lady’s head, but also to the objects appearing behind it. We see the reflection of a corner of the table in front, which anchors the mirrored image in the perceptive space but, in addition, a vertically descending, fair wooden leg for which the painted room does not give us any hint. While he has carefully erased all traces of his presence in the painting, provoking the famous impression of intimacy, Vermeer nonetheless reintroduces a tiny but provocative sign of his presence through the right leg of his easel (see Arasse 1993). The painter as spectator has been included in the painting. Merleau-Ponty called this the fundamental *narcissism of vision*:

Thus since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: this is the fundamental narcissism of all vision. And thus, for the same reason, the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity—which is the second and more profound sense of the narcissism ... so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another, and we no longer know which sees and which is seen. (1969: 139)

In another painting which has been less commented on—probably because it contradicts the notion of immanent self-closure—Vermeer articulates the reciprocal cross of the gazes. In *A Young Woman standing at a Virginal* (completed around 1670) (fig. 6), we have now definitely entered the intimacy of the previous scene, and it has received a further spatial torsion: The woman’s gaze now directly rests on the spectator who has taken the place formerly occupied by the standing man; the stool comfortably upholstered with blue velvet is as much an invitation as its slightly turned-

away position indicates a separation crossed only by the intersecting gazes; the standing Cupid has lowered his bow, indicating the arrow has already reached its mark.

Merleau-Ponty chose a powerful metaphor (and its power partially derives from the fact that it is a term from optical physiology itself) in order to describe this crossing of the gazes: the *chiasm*. The concept of the chiasm indicates that vision and the visible can never ultimately coincide, though they are in a relation of “*simultaneously holding and being held*” (1969: 260) Just as Vermeer’s seemingly transparent paintings slowly and progressively disclose their arcane organization before our eyes, so do Merleau-Ponty’s often cryptic working notes to the *Visible and the Invisible*, left unfinished at the moment of his sudden death, unfold their significance in front of the paintings he extensively studied. If seeing is to possess *at a distance*, inversely “he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless”—and this *unless* explains the deeper but at the same time very simple reason for the *ontological* foundation Merleau-Ponty wants to give to perception—“*he is of it*” (1969: 134f). The pro-jective, ex-centric dimension of vision, extensively commented upon from Plato’s *Timaeus* up to Sartre’s analysis of the Gaze, would thus not be opposed, but rather constitute the backside of a fundamental torsion of the Visible onto itself. Accordingly, the “ecstatic” movement out of my actual being is correlative with my inherence to Being for which Merleau-Ponty synonymously says “the Visible.” However, the Visible is as little the totality of all visible objects as Being is the sum of all single beings. The Visible should rather be thought of as “sparse visibility” (*visibilité épars*; 1969: 136), checkered with blind spots and clefts of an invisibility which is not beyond but beneath and within vision. The “madness of vision” would thus point towards the fact that vision is always both total and yet always only partial—as everything pertaining to a finite being.



Fig. 6: Jan Vermeer: *Young Woman Standing at a Virginal*, ca. 1670, Oil on canvas, 51.7 x 45.2 cm, National Gallery, London.

Endnotes

¹ “The problems posed in *Ph.P.* are insoluble because I start there from the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction.” Working note dated July 1959 (VI 250/200).

² Interestingly, Georges Didi-Huberman has taken this same observation as a starting point for a completely different argumentation aimed at disqualifying the “mapping theory” towards a phenomenology of the affect and of the detail in

Vermeer’s *Lacemaker*: “The Art of Not Describing: Vermeer—the Detail and the Patch,” *History of the Human Sciences* II, 2 (June 1989) 135-69.

³ For a further analysis of this text which I compare with Maurice Blanchot’s reflection on representation see my article “Bare exteriority. Philosophy of the image and the image of philosophy in Maurice Blanchot and Martin Heidegger.” *Colloquy 10: “Blanchot the Obscure”* (2005), 69-82.

⁴ Michel de Certeau was the first to use Merleau-Ponty’s striking phrase in his “La folie de la vision” (*Esprit* 66, special issue on Merleau-Ponty, June 1982, 89-101), although he does not interpret its meaning. Referring to Merleau-Ponty, but without commenting on the context, Catherine Buci-Glucksmann used the phrase as the title of her book on Baroque art (1986).

⁵ The iconography of the card held up by Cupid was traced back by Eddy de Jongh to Otto van Veen’s widely used emblem book *Amorum emblemata* (Antwerp, 1608). While in Veen’s version, Cupid holds up a card with the number “I” and a ring, exemplifying the caption “a lover ought to love only one,” Vermeer seems to deliberately be leaving his card blank.

Table of Illustrations

Fig. 1: Emmanuel de Witte: *Interior with a Woman at the Virginal*, ca. 1665, Oil on canvas, 97.8 x 110.2 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Montréal. Reprinted in: *Regards sur les collections du Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal*, Montréal: Musée des Beaux-Arts 1992, p. 178.

Fig. 2: Jan Vermeer: *The Officer and the Laughing Girl* (detail), ca. 1655-1660, Oil on canvas, 50.5 x 46 cm, The Frick Collection, New York. Reprinted in: Wheelock, Arthur K. (1995). *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 54.

Fig. 3: Jan Vermeer: *The Music Lesson*, ca. 1664, Oil on canvas 74.6 x 64.1 cm, Royal Collection, St. James’ Palace, London. Reprinted in Wheelock, Arthur W. (1995). *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, p. 84.

Fig. 4: Albrecht Dürer, *Man Drawing a Reclining Woman*, Woodcut from the second edition of Dürer’s *Unterweysung der Messung*, Nuremberg, 1538. Reprinted in and courtesy of Kurth, Willi (ed.) (1963). *The Complete Woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer*. New York: Dover, plate 340.

Fig. 5: Jan Vermeer: *The Music Lesson* (detail). see fig. 3.

Fig. 6: Jan Vermeer: *Young Woman Standing at a Virginal*, ca. 1670, Oil on canvas, 51.7 x 45.2 cm, National Gallery, London. Reprinted in: Huerta, Robert D. (2005). *Vermeer and Plato. Painting the Ideal*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, p. 143.

Works Cited

- Alloa, Emanuel (2005). "Bare exteriority. Philosophy of the image and the image of philosophy in Maurice Blanchot and Martin Heidegger." *Colloquy 10: "Blanchot the Obscure,"* 69-82.
- Alpers, Svetlana (1983). *The Art of Description*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arasse, Daniel (1993). *L'ambition de Vermeer*. Paris: Adam Biro.
- Blumenberg, Hans (2006). *Beschreibung des Menschen*, ed. Manfred Sommer. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Bryson, Norman (1983). *Vision and painting. The Logic of the Gaze*. London: Macmillan.
- Buci-Glucksmann, Catherine (1986). *La folie du voir. De l'esthétique baroque*. Paris: Galilée.
- Certeau, Michel de (1982). "La folie de la vision." *Esprit* 66, 89-101.
- Claudel, Paul (1935). "Introduction à la peinture hollandaise." *L'Oeil écoute*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964.
- Descartes, René (1973). *Ceuvres de Descartes*, vol. 6. *Discours de la méthode, Essais*. Ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. Paris: J. Vrin.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges (1989). "The Art of Not Describing: Vermeer—the Detail and the Patch." *History of the Human Sciences* II, 2 (June 1989): 135-69.
- Heidegger, Martin (1977). "The Age of the World Picture" (orig. pub. 1938), translated by W. Lovitt. In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 115-154.
- Huerta, Roberta D. (2003). *Giants of Delft. Johannes Vermeer and the Natural Philosophers: The Parallel Search for Knowledge during the Age of Discovery*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press/London: Associated University Presses.
- Jonas, Hans (1954). "The Nobility of Sight. A Study in the Phenomenology of the Senses." In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 14, June 1954, No. 4, 507-519 (reprinted in *The Phenomenon of Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1982) 135-56)
- Leonhard, Karin (2003). *Das gemalte Zimmer. Zur Interieurmalerei Jan Vermeers*. Munich: Fink.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1964). "Eye and Mind." In *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, translated by C. Dallery. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 159-190.
- . (1969). *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

- . (1973). *Prose of the World*, translated by John O'Neill. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.